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Sustainable development of tourism*

Report of the Secretary-General

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* The present report was prepared by the World Tourism Organization as task manager for the area of sustainable development of tourism, with contributions from other United Nations agencies and international organizations. The report is a brief factual overview, which intends to inform the Commission on Sustainable Development on key developments in the subject area.

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Introduction

1. While tourism was not the subject of a chapter in Agenda 21,[1] the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21,[2] adopted by the General Assembly at its nineteenth special session in 1997, included sustainable tourism as one of its sectoral themes. The Programme recognized that tourism was one of the largest industries in the world and one of the fastest growing economic sectors.[3] It noted that the expected growth in the tourism sector and the increasing reliance of many developing countries, including small island developing States, on that sector as a major employer and contributor to the economy highlighted the need to pay special attention to the relationship between environmental conservation and protection and sustainable tourism. The present report examines trends and developments in sustainable tourism and identifies issues for future consideration.

I. Trends in tourism

2. Tourism has been one of the major economic and social phenomena of the twentieth century. From an activity enjoyed by only a small group of relatively well-off people at the beginning of the century, it had become a mass phenomenon in the more developed countries by the 1970s and has now reached wider groups of people in most nations.

3. In 1999, the number of international tourist arrivals reached 664 million, while receipts from international tourism were $455 billion. During the 1990s, international arrivals grew at an average annual rate of 4.2 per cent, while international tourism receipts, at current prices and excluding international transport costs, had an average annual growth rate of 7.3 per cent. Domestic tourist movements are much higher than international tourist arrivals, though more difficult to quantify.

4. Tourism, a sector that integrates a wide range of economic activities, is now regarded as the world's largest industry. In 1998, 7.9 per cent of the worldwide export value of goods and services came from tourism, surpassing such leading industries as automotive products and chemicals. Tourism is already the largest sector of international trade in services. For many nations, in particular most small island developing States, but also some bigger and more economically diversified countries, tourism has become the main sector of economic activity, or at least the main source of foreign exchange earnings, and in most countries it is an important source of employment.

5. In addition to strong overall expansion, the development of tourism is characterized by continuing geographical spread and diversification of tourist destinations. While in 1950 the top 15 tourist destinations, all in Western Europe and North America, attracted 97 per cent of the world's total arrivals, by 1999 this figure had fallen to 62 per cent, with market shares increasing for developing countries and economies in transition, particularly in South-East Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, and Latin America. Africa, with the exception of a few countries in North Africa, remains a less visited destination, with only 2.5 per cent of total international arrivals.

6. Some key qualitative development trends in tourism include: increased market segmentation; development of new forms of tourism, especially those related to nature, wildlife, rural areas and culture; and introduction of new programmes in traditional package tours. Consumers' motivations and behaviour are increasingly characterized by a more selective choice of destination, greater attention to the tourism experience and its quality, and a greater sensitivity to the environment, traditional culture and local people at the destinations.

II. Incorporation of sustainability in tourism development

7. As a result of the rapid expansion of the tourism sector, traditional and emerging tourism destinations are facing increasing pressure on their natural, cultural and socio-economic environments. There is now a recognition that uncontrolled growth in tourism aiming at short-term benefits often results in negative impacts, harming the environment and societies, and destroying the very basis on which tourism is built and thrives.

8. Even before the 1990s, some negative impacts of tourism were addressed by some Governments and international organizations, including precarious conditions of employment, child exploitation and prostitution, degeneration of traditions and cultural values, and environmental damage to tourist sites and natural settings. Such adverse environmental impacts are caused by over-consumption of resources, pollution

and waste generated by development of tourism infrastructure and facilities, transportation, and tourist activities themselves. It was also recognized that tourism had the potential to bring economic benefits to host communities and serve as a tool for poverty alleviation, conservation of natural and cultural assets and other benefits, provided it was properly planned and managed with a long-term vision.

9. The principle of sustainable tourism was proposed as early as 1988 by the World Tourism Organization, with sustainable tourism "envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems".

10. Host societies have become progressively aware of the problems of unsustainable tourism, and sustainability concerns are increasingly being addressed in national, regional and local tourism policies, strategies and plans. In addition, some tourists are now demanding higher environmental standards from tourist services, as well as a greater commitment to local communities and economies.

11. Although tourism was not included in Agenda 21, the recognition of the importance of sustainability in tourism by the key stakeholders, including Governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations and the international tourism private sector, resulted in the formulation of Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry[4] in 1995. Many tourism-based communities have formulated their own Agenda 21s at the local level.

12. A multi-stakeholder Working Group on Tourism was called for by the Commission on Sustainable Development at its seventh session.[5] The Working Group was tasked with coordinating the implementation of the international work programme on sustainable tourism development adopted by the seventh session of CSD. This Working Group is an innovative mechanism for collaborative efforts by major groups, Governments and international organizations to enable sustainable tourism development. The first meeting of the Working Group was convened by the World Tourism Organization in Costa Rica (January 2000), where members identified 11 priority issues covering a wide variety of aspects of sustainable tourism development. Further progress has been slow owing to lack of funding.

13. There has been gradual but increasingly widespread application of environmental management techniques in tourism companies and establishments, in particular hotels. There has also been increasing use and popularity of voluntary approaches such as certification systems, eco-labels, environmental awards and codes of conduct. The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism was introduced by the World Tourism Organization in 1999 following over two years of consultation with the industry and was approved by the member States of the World Tourism Organization. It has been submitted to the Economic and Social Council for consideration at its substantive session of 2001 (see E/2001/3).

14. A set of sustainability indicators on tourism has been developed and tested in a number of countries under the initiative of the World Tourism Organization.[6] These indicators are now beginning to be used at some destinations. Further work is required to improve existing know-how and methodologies for the definition, adaptation and application of indicators to monitor the social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism. Further work is also required to apply indicators in a larger number of countries.

15. Many tourist destinations are in mountain and coastal regions in different climate zones from those of tourists' home countries. Tourists are therefore less familiar with natural disasters in those areas, for example, avalanches in ski resorts, hurricanes in the Caribbean islands and temperature extremes causing sunstroke or frostbite. It is important that tourism development in such areas include public information, monitoring and forecasting with respect to such emergencies.

16. Ecotourism is a small but rapidly growing niche market. Ecotourism activities have been expanding rapidly over the past two decades worldwide and further growth is expected in the future. Ecotourism generally involves travel by small groups to natural areas with the main motivation being the observation and appreciation of nature, and includes educational information on local ecosystems, cultures and sustainability issues. It also attempts to minimize negative impacts upon the nature and sociocultural environment. As one of the tools to control and manage ecotourism activities, it often involves fees for entry to

protected natural areas, with at least part of the fees dedicated to the conservation of the area. The International Year of Ecotourism in 2002 will offer an opportunity to review ecotourism experiences worldwide, in order to consolidate tools and institutional frameworks that ensure its sustainable development in the future.

III. Issues for further consideration

17. Tourism is expected to continue to grow in the future owing to population growth, improved living standards, improvement and expansion of transportation systems, increasing free time and other factors. According to forecasts by the World Tourism Organization, international tourist arrivals are likely to almost triple over the next two decades, with nearly 1.6 billion tourists visiting foreign countries by the year 2020. This will further increase the pressure on the natural, cultural and socio-economic environments of popular destinations. More intensified efforts to address sustainability in tourism development are required.

18. Along with tourism in general, ecotourism and other forms of environmentally friendly tourism are expected to continue growing rapidly. This will also require specific planning, management and infrastructure to protect the natural sites of interest, which are often ecologically fragile. Availability of finance and capacity-building may hold a key to the sustainable development of this subsector.

19. Small island developing States face particular challenges. Tourism is often seen as a promising growth sector in countries with a natural environment appealing to tourists, especially in view of the constraints that those countries may face in respect of developing alternative sources of foreign exchange through exports. However, rapid development of tourism can cause significant social disruptions and increase environmental and ecological pressures. The fragile ecosystems of small island States, and their generally more limited scope for pursuing alternative development strategies, make concerns for the environmental and ecological impact of tourism particularly acute. Integrated and environmentally and culturally conscious tourism planning should be developed to make tourism compatible with the conservation of major ecosystems and with the preservation of the historical-cultural heritage.

Notes

[1] *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992*, vol. I, *Resolutions Adopted by the Conference* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigendum), resolution 1, annex II.

[2] General Assembly resolution S-19/2, annex.

[3] Ibid., para. 67.

[4] Prepared jointly by the World Tourism Organization, the World Travel and Tourism Council and the Earth Council.

[5] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1999, Supplement No. 9* (E/1999/29), chap. I, sect. C, decision 7/3, para. 10.

[6] See *A Practical Guide for the Development and Application of Indicators of Sustainable Tourism* (World Tourism Organization, 1996).